

Frequently Asked Questions | King County Dependency CASA report templates

These **Frequently Asked Questions** (“FAQs”), along with responses, may answer some of your initial questions about the 2015 CASA report templates. This list of FAQs will grow and change over time.

What are more of the differences in these 2015 report templates?

1. More in accordance with the Dependency legal process, current laws, rules and DSHS reports.
2. Emphasis on flexible levels of user cues to help guide CASAs through the report creation while minimizing guesswork.
3. No more pop-up window when creating a new report. This represents a change to *some* Windows users; Mac users never had this functionality.
4. No more fussing with document protection. The 2015 report templates are designed to provide flexibility with document protection remaining always on (to avoid unexpected risky Word behavior). *This represents no change to those CASAs who never modified this setting.*

Are CASAs being asked more information?

Yes, more specific information is sought, primarily because of changes in the legal needs and laws. ASAs aren't expected to be legal experts but are a party to the legal case involving legal issues. These 2015 reports are more aligned with the specific step in the Dependency legal process, the specific type of hearing.

Another reason it may feel like more information is asked is to remove the guesswork of what is/isn't important to the court, for that specific hearing type, and help guide you through that part of the legal process. This is especially important if the case is potentially headed to a fact finding (trial). For some CASAs, it isn't until experiencing the fact-finding processes – dependency and termination – that the earlier parts of the legal process gain clarity.

Again, the CASA isn't expected to be a legal expert, but is expected to have an understanding of the CASA's role and the Dependency legal process. For new CASAs, much of this comes from lots of questions, consultation with their CASA Supervisor (and other CASAs), and a bit of experience.

What's different about the parties' compliance and progress?

The CASA reports have long included these recommendations; they're just presented somewhat differently than old reports. First, let's refresh on the terms:

Compliance relates primarily to DSHS and the parents, and previously court-ordered services. Some cases may have other parties to the case who may be responsible for certain services (i.e., Catholic Community Services).

DSHS is responsible for:

- Making court-ordered services available to the child
- The child being in the court-ordered placement
- Making the necessary court-ordered services available for the parents
- The child being available for court-ordered visitation

The parents are individually responsible for:

- Cooperating and attending court-ordered visitation.
- Cooperating and participating with court-ordered services until completed or told otherwise by the court.

Progress relates to the individual parent's progress on correcting the court-identified parenting deficiencies identified by the court as preventing them from being a suitable parent for their child.

How to fairly access and make compliance and progress recommendations of the parties?

Both recommendations are important because they are key elements in the Dependency legal proceedings; they directly pertain to each parent's ability to safely and suitably parent the child. The key is to make *sound* judgment and not a potentially biased *value* judgment. Make your recommendations based on facts and information available to you, and after review with fair, thoughtful consideration.

As the child's CASA, services provided to the child are equally important, sometimes urgently important, for the child's best interest. For example, the court should know if DSHS hasn't yet provided an academic tutor 6 months after ordered by the court.

Initially when assigned a case, you may not yet know the parties' compliance, something the court and parties understand. DSHS is required to make their recommendations in their Court Report. After you become familiar with the case – the parties, discovery, case file updates, assessments, visitation reports, etc. – you'll form your own clear thoughts. That information, minus your own research, is usually the same used as the basis for DSHS's recommendation but don't be surprised if you and DSHS sometimes arrive at different recommendations (happening for a variety of reasons).

Why do CASAs care about paternity?

Paternity is a very complex legal issue; even if the child looks just like the father, unless it's **legally** established – through birth certificate, court order, filed affidavit of paternity -- it isn't established. Lawyers, the legal system and the court have a "finer" view of the paternity issue but the above level of understanding is usually sufficient for CASAs. The issue of paternity is especially important with cases potentially headed toward termination fact-finding. The legal case can be complicated and prolonged if unexpected potential fathers later surface.

Where do CASAs find all the information needed for the reports?

Initially it feels like a lot, but with a bit of experience it becomes easier and clearer. An excellent place to start is by reading the recent court orders, particularly the **Order** section. If preparing a Motion report, read the filing party's motion for the contested hearing. The DSHS Court Report is also informative but may not be available prior to your report submission. After reading through orders, writing reports and attending hearings a few times, things start making more sense.

Another key goal of these report templates is to provide more accessible information to help guide the CASA, to "cue" about the information being requested. Green hidden text, viewable just to you and CASA staff, provides clarity and points to information sources. And don't forget to read the report question or "heading" itself. Though the wording is sometimes in legal terms, don't be intimidated; think about the intention of the words and even the "legalese" becomes more familiar over time.

Your #1 source for much of the information comes directly from the dependency petition, subsequent orders, along with parties' related filed court documents. This is equally true if your case moves to a Termination case -- the termination petition, subsequent orders, and parties' related filed documents. Again, don't be intimidated by the legalese as these documents contain key established court findings, orders and other important information.

Your #2 source is discovery, DSHS case notes, medical records, assessments, treatment records, visitation reports, correspondence, etc. The bulk of this comes from DSHS. Formal discovery is usually infrequent; it comes from the AAG in preparation for a planned dependency or termination fact finding (trial). Less formal, DSHS case file updates come from the social worker directly and often need to be requested (informally or sometimes more formally by working with CASA Program staff).

Your #3 source is YOU:

- Your own contact and meetings with the parties and others involved with the case,
- Your review of formal and informal discovery,
- Your own research and case notes – your meetings and contact with the child, the individual parents, involved family members, treatment or care providers,

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- Your own independent review and interpretation of all information available to you

Your #4 source is your CASA Supervisor. If you are still feeling unsure, contact your CASA Supervisor for guidance.

Why all the tables?

In report writing, it's often said that saying less is the means to saying more. This is especially true given Dependency Court and the high report volumes the Court and parties review. Three thoughts to consider in helping your report (i.e., you, the child) have a clear and effective voice in the matter before the court:

1. The reader has even less time than the author.
2. The more you write, the more the reader's attention diminishes and the less retained.
3. Direct information (observations, facts, case information) has the most impact/weight with the court.

A key goal in these redesigned templates is to guide you through providing information important to the court for the legal case and specific hearing and equally, help the court have a stronger sense of the child they often don't get otherwise. Some experienced CASAs may have already been providing this information and now less experienced CASAs no longer have to guess at what to report.

Back to the tables, after testing alternative methods of asking for user input, this table-style format was determined to be the most effective in meeting the combined needs of those who rely on the CASA reports:

- CASAs, in preparing the reports for the various Dependency legal proceedings/hearings,
 - While providing needed flexibility for multiple children with multiple fathers in multiple placements/situations
- CASA Supervisors, in reviewing and editing the CASA reports,
- CASA Support Staff, in processing and distributing CASA reports,
- CASA Legal Staff, in using these reports with limited hearing preparation (i.e., finding key CASA case information and recommendations quickly), and equally beneficial for the other parties too.
- Most importantly, in providing the court with the CASA information they need and expect for the specific hearing, and easy to locate within the report.

It's important to note that the use of tables in these templates simply **encourages** more concise input; they don't limit the length or otherwise restrict it. There are specific areas identified within the report for expanded and "other" (commentary) input, providing you with further flexibility.

What's different with the tables in these 2015 report templates?

In old reports, the tables were designed differently and some were restricted, greatly limiting the user's ability to adopt the report to the case's specific needs.

The tables in these report templates are now entirely **unrestricted**. You have full text editing control – copy/delete, font and paragraph formatting, spellcheck. You can even copy/delete individual table rows when necessary. When doing table modifications, please do consider that the tables solicit specific information important to the legal hearing and legal Dependency case.

Why can't I turn off MS Word documentation protection like before?

CASA report templates continue to use Word's document-protection feature to prevent small yet key portions of the report from being inadvertently changed and to restrict user input to specific choices and/or placement at the top of each report.

Other than the top of reports, protected/restriction portions are limited to main section headings, footnotes, and green user-help. Much thought went into report template design allowing document protection to remain turned on at all times yet allow the user the needed flexibility to adopt the report template to their case's situation. Document protection is now password-protected to ensure remaining on in order to prevent some unexpected risky Word behavior.

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If you never turned off this feature when using the previous report templates, this represents no change.